

Language Teaching at the Elementary School Level: Language Bias among Teachers and Pedagogical Tools to Check it

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Introduction

At times, an elementary teacher is herself filled with certain prejudices regarding the use of the mother tongue in the classroom. This article discusses the need for teachers to overcome these for effective language teaching. Based on a pilot study of around two hundred children between the ages of four and seven years, the article also suggests some pedagogical tools which will help teachers use children's mother tongues in the classroom.

Role of an Elementary Teacher

'Elementary Education' from Class 1 to 8 hopes to prepare future citizens. It will not be an exaggeration to say that teachers at this stage lay the foundations of the entire society. An important quality of a teacher is to be free from prejudices. Her personal prejudices should never stand in the way of her service to humanity, especially when it comes to her interactions with children.

'Linguistics' and some Language Prejudices

An aspiring elementary teacher may question the need for the inclusion of papers of Linguistics (i.e. the science of language) in a Bachelor or a Masters of Elementary Education programme; she knows that she will never teach these topics directly to students. However, a study of Linguistics makes us less prejudiced language teachers in many ways.

Linguistics introduces us to the nature and structure of language and to our rich multi-lingual heritage. It helps us understand that languages are not inherently superior to dialects for the often stated reasons: Dialects have no grammar, no literature, no script, smaller communities and that it is spoken over a small area. When we study the relationship between language and power we realise that the difference between a language and a dialect is not a question of language at all but a political question where what is spoken by the elite becomes a language and all other varieties spoken get the status of a dialect. Teachers begin to appreciate that every language that children bring into the classroom is equally rich and scientific.

Another thing that becomes clear is that a child's mother tongue is actually a resource for the teacher in the classroom. When a child of 6 enters the school, she also carries with her many concepts of all school subjects in that language. It is up to the teacher to be sensitive to this knowledge and utilize it in the classroom.

Last but not the least, what we become sensitive to is that a child's mother tongue is a part of the child's identity. If the child is made to feel that there is no space for it in her classroom, then she will feel lost and alienated.

The Study

A pilot study was undertaken across three MCD primary schools in New Delhi, which comprised approximately two hundred children in the age

group four to seven years. Special attention was paid to include children from linguistically varied backgrounds. This was done in order to study the impact on the level of cognition of students who are taught in Hindi, but belonged to a different speech community. The study methodology mainly involved observation and interviews. The distribution of students has been depicted in table 1, as given below:]

Table 1: Distribution of students based on their mother tongue/MT

(a) Delhi variety of Hindi as MT	70
(b) Punjabi as MT	40
(c) Haryanvi (Jatu) as MT	45
(d) Bihari variety of Hindi as MT	30
(e) Others (Bangla, Oriya, Tamil)	15

Depending on the performance in the various evaluative tests conducted in the classes, the students were divided into five categories. Table 2 shows the distribution of students in the five categories labelled I, II, III, IV and V.

Table 2: Category-wise distribution of students based on academic performance

Category		Number of students
I	Outstanding	10
II	Very good	30
III	Good	40
IV	Average	70
V	Poor	50

Out of 80 students in the first three categories, 40 belonged to group (a), 10 belonged to group

(b), 15 belonged to group (c), 15 belonged to group (d) and 0 to group (e) (for group classification please refer to Table 1). When depicted on a graph (as shown in Figure 1) the results of these figures were indeed eye-opening.

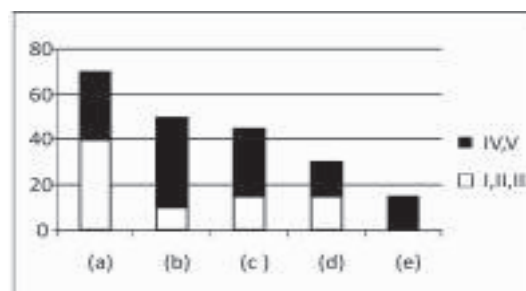


Fig. 1: Distribution of Students based on their Academic Performance

The interpretation of the above graph is simple. The best performance is indicated by group (a) and group (d), where 55 per cent and 50 per cent of the total students of those groups have shown good to outstanding academic performance. The worst performing group is (e), in which none of the students belong to the top three performing categories.

Thus, it was found that the students whose MT closely matched the medium of instruction showed better performance in the examinations compared with students who struggled to comprehend the language in which the lessons were being imparted.

This study emphasizes the importance of the use of the mother tongue by teachers in elementary education. While it is not always possible for the teacher to converse in the mother tongue of each and every student, the adoption of some new pedagogical tools can easily take care of such problems. Some of these practices include:

(a) Connecting school learning to children's daily lives

The themes taught in the classroom must be connected to the daily lives of children. The

teacher may begin by setting an example. He/she may start by narrating her daily routine in her mother tongue (MT) as well as the target language (OT or other tongue) (Kachru, 1992, p. 4). During the course of the narration, he/she may pick prominent words from the discourse which children can easily identify with. Now the same exercise can be repeated by asking children to share their daily routines. Narrating the same incident in the MT and the OT will help children to overcome their language biases. Even if some children are not very good at the OT they will still feel good about speaking more in their MT. With this kind of mindset they will approach their learning with much more confidence.

(b) Introduction of humour increases the chances of learning and cognition.

Humour can play a fundamental role in creating harmony and cohesion between teachers and students. Learners must be encouraged to share ‘funny’ experiences around language. Learners can also explore the functions of humour in society such as breaking ice, acquiring status, or making social commentary.

Imagine a conversation between two Hindi speakers, one speaking the Bihari Hindi and the other speaking the Delhi Hindi.

- /hamko bhukh lagaa hai/ (Bihari Hindi)

(I am feeling hungry)

- /aur kisko bhukh laga hai?/ (Delhi Hindi)

(Who else is feeling hungry?)

- / hamko aur kisiko nahi/ (Bihari Hindi)

(Me and no one else)

- /to ‘mujhe’ bolo ‘hamko’ nahi/ (Delhi Hindi)

(Then say ‘I’ instead of ‘we’)

Such linguistic differences are very easy to identify in a multilingual language environment and the teacher can use the humour in the situation for focusing on the various levels of

linguistic differences. The recommendation here is that children can learn a lot about the target language(OT) if they appreciate the similarities and differences with MTs. Armed with this knowledge, learners will be able to express themselves more freely and regain control of their identity. (Khoury, Raybould & Salim, 2012).

Humour is an inextricable part of the human experience and thus a fundamental aspect of humanity’s unique capacity for language. In fact, it stands as one of the few universals applicable to all peoples and knowledge throughout the world (Kruger, 1996; Trachtenberg, 1979). Teaching techniques involving humour will help keep students interested in classroom teaching. In the case of a multicultural classroom, the additional aspects of the introduction of humour make the class interesting as well as informative. Let us discuss this in relation to the following point where humour and multiculturalism play significant roles.

(c) Use of multiculturalism prevailing in India as an aid .

India is the meeting point of several cultures and ethnicities. Our mother tongue is a marker of our cultural heritage. Providing equal footing to all cultures thus, involves giving space to children’s mother tongues in the classroom.

Let us imagine a conversation in a multilingual classroom consisting of Bangla, Hindi and Tamil L1 speakers.

- /aami jol khaai/ (Bangla L1 speaker)

(I drink water)

- /jal khai nahi pi/ (Hindi L1 speaker)

(Not eat water, drink water)

- In Bangla, the verb /khaai/ is used in place of the verb /pi/ as in Hindi but it means the same.

(The teacher explains).

- /seri, naan jalam kudikaren/ (Tamil L1 speaker)
(Ok, I drink water)
- /kaun saa naan jal gayaa/ (Hindi L1 speaker)
(Which bread got burnt?)

The language teacher can make use of such confusions in communication to bring out the differences and similarities between various languages. This in turn may lead to a better classroom environment where not only will children express themselves without any bias, but they will also learn to be open towards other languages and cultures. This kind of a practice will be educative for both the teacher and the taught.

Better to Practice than to Preach

After the discussion on multiculturalism in the previous section, it becomes evident that maintaining a healthy linguistic environment in a classroom is not difficult. The teacher need not be speaking all the languages spoken by her children at home. He/she just needs to be open to the languages spoken by the students. The primary goal should be to make the students think on their own. Once this goal is achieved, language education becomes a more meaningful journey.

Conclusion

Thus an elementary teacher has immense opportunities to mould young minds, and this role becomes even more important and interesting for language teachers. Language is intrinsic to our identity, so utmost care must be taken to make sure that no child's identity is maligned in the process of teaching and learning. Language is also a very powerful tool for expression, hence the teacher must first make the children comfortable with their own native languages, and then take them to newer heights where they can learn other languages. Learning becomes

deformed in a suppressed and biased environment, and beautiful in an environment free from prejudice.

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